Depression and exercise

What is depression?

Depression is a common, potentially debilitating condition characterised by sadness, loss of interest or pleasure and feelings of guilt or low self worth. Depression may also manifest as disturbances in sleep, concentration, appetite, or as persistent fatigue (1).

Symptoms of depression may occur alone, or concurrently with chronic illness, such as diabetes, or subsequent to chronic injury. For example, the prevalence of comorbid diabetes and moderate to severe depression in Australia is between 22% and 35% (2). Major depression is also associated with an increased likelihood of early mortality, primarily due to cardiometabolic disease (3).

Why is physical activity or exercise important in the management of depression?

People who undertake regular physical activity or exercise, even at very low levels, are less likely to experience symptoms of depression and are less likely to experience future depressive episodes (4,5). Exercise has a moderate clinical effect on depressive symptoms and may be as effective as psychological or pharmaceutical therapies (6) for some individuals. Physical activity and exercise is also effective in reducing symptoms of depression for people experiencing other mental disorders (7). Perhaps more importantly, regular physical activity and exercise are well-established strategies for weight management, improving diabetes control and reducing the impact of cardiovascular disease that often occurs in mental illness including depression (8).

What type of exercise might be beneficial for people with depression?

A recent systematic review (9) concluded that supervised aerobic exercise which is similar to that recommended for the general population (10) is likely to be beneficial for people with depression. This is summarised below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Intensity</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Supervision</th>
<th>Setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3-4 times weekly</td>
<td>Low – moderate or patient-preferred</td>
<td>30-40 minutes</td>
<td>Any aerobic activity</td>
<td>Appropriately trained and qualified personnel</td>
<td>Group or individual</td>
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Ideally, exercise participation should be ongoing; however, a minimum program length of 9 weeks is suggested.
How do I commence an exercise program?

Talk to your treating specialist about an exercise program that suits your personal preferences and circumstances. They may refer you to an Accredited Exercise Physiologist, who has specialised training in the design and delivery of exercise and lifestyle interventions for people with chronic and complex conditions including depression.

References and further information

Exercise is Medicine Australia www.exerciseismedicine.org.au

Find an Accredited Exercise Physiologist www.essa.org.au

Exercise Right www.exerciseright.com.au


